

1965 Compartment - Gunpowder, Rockets and Fire ... Oh My!

The street view gave a rustic impression
of a poorly maintained old stucco house on a hill
in the center of a large yard
lined with maple trees and bushes,
surrounded by a rusty old fence
that was used to keep two large dogs,
a St. Bernard and a German Shepherd,
within the confines.
Both dogs were mean,
with a history of abuse from former owners.
Upon arrival at the Steinberg house,
both strangers and friends
were escorted through the yard by a family member,
to avoid a dog attack.
All was well once the dogs sensed there was
no threat from a new visitor.
Though we were regular guests,
the canine hostility always greeted us
as if we were strangers.
We grew accustomed to the hostile receptions.

During the summer holidays of 1965
we frequented Mac Steinberg's above-ground swimming pool,
situated in the back corner of the yard.
One had to climb an attached
aluminum ladder to get into the pool,
with a depth of four feet along the sides and five feet at the center.
The water was cold and clear with a strong chlorine odour,
an artificial turquoise blue, highly unsuitable for fish.

Mac had a dark complexion, dark hair,
and a wide, hooked nose between droopy eyes.
He always appeared tired.
It was a facial characteristic that got him a lot of abuse
from teachers at school,
which they interpreted as ineptness, boredom
or just a general lack of enthusiasm.
He was our unofficial ring-leader
though we were never particularly looking for one,
and for better or worse,
we eleven-year-old boys often went along with his schemes.
It was his idea for us to buy flippers and underwater masks,
which added a new dimension to our enjoyment of the swimming pool.
The water was so clear that you could see across
to the other side of the pool.
An underwater peek-a-boo.

On occasional weekends, the Steinberg relatives
would visit and take over the swimming pool.
We would ogle when an aunt or niece in a two-piece bathing suit
climbed down the ladder and submerged into the cold water.
We thought we were using our water masks inconspicuously,

but the women knew what our underwater maneuvers were all about.
Whenever the pool got too crowded, we'd find something else to do.
Sometimes we would sit on the living room couch
and watch whatever was on the rabbit-eared television.

Like every household in the country,
there were good and bad days at the Steinberg home.
The Steinberg household had extreme highs and lows.
Sometimes there was much laughter and merriment.
Siegfried was a father with many interests outside of raising his family.
He was a short (and short-tempered) stocky man
with broad shoulders and powerful arms.
Mac's mother, Emma, was an excellent cook
and often baked pastries in her messy kitchen.
Wonderful aromas drifted through the house
whenever Emma had something baking in the oven.
She was a dark-haired woman with pale skin,
hidden from the sun,
a plump but not obese figure.
She had a strong accent from her hometown of Vienna.
She often asked the meaning of certain English words
during conversations around the dining room table.
Mac often ridiculed his mother's pronunciation of words.
She would yell back at him in German,
then state with annoyance, "Oh, Mac, he makes me sick."
We thought Mac was often too harsh and disrespectful to his mother,
and he usually got away with it if Siegfried wasn't around,
but it was a different matter when his father was nearby.
Siegfried had a volatile temper, and when triggered,
all hell would break loose.
Dinner conversations could go from cordial to nasty in a flash.

On several occasions, we witnessed Mac Steinberg
get a beating at the hands of his father.
These beatings were usually a result of Mac mouthing off
or doing something stupid to run afoul of his parents,
causing the house to explode like a high-octane combustion chamber.
One spark was all it took.
Siegfried would strike Mac,
and Mac would shield his face with his arms.
When it was bad, Siegfried would use his belt to whip Mac.
On those occasions,
Mac would hide under the nearest furniture he could find.
Mrs. Steinberg would yell, "Hit him again, Siegfried. Hit him again."
They often yelled in German,
but we understood the general meaning of what was being said.
The angry parents would invariably announce in our direction,
in no uncertain terms, "You boys go home now."
We would bolt out of the house lickety-split.

The boom and bust, ecstatic highs or extreme lows,
were the inherent characteristics of the Steinberg house.
It was also how the Steinbergs' children were raised,
either spoiled rotten or disciplined with an iron fist.

They were given lavish presents, sometimes randomly, but always on big occasions like birthdays and Christmas. The gifts Mac received were mostly hobby-type items designed for young techy kids. He was seldom, if ever, given anything related to sports activities. His gifts seemed to reflect Siegfried's interests as much as Mac's. Mac got a CB radio and a set of walkie-talkies one Christmas, but he also got a beating that same Christmas Day, for mouthing off. Each time Mac got a beating, it was always the same routine, "Hit him again, Siegfried. Hit him again." Every time we heard those words, we knew it was time for us to leave. Some of the beatings that Mac received made for stories worth repeating.

One afternoon, we were at the Steinberg house while the parents were away. We were armed with plastic straws and a good supply of dried peas. Naturally, a pea-shooter fight broke out, and it soon became each kid for himself. The battles raged on all over the house. I had Dudley Wagner, the plump kid in our group, under siege in the back main floor bathroom from my position in the nearby linen closet. Mac and Mitch Aitken were doing guerrilla warfare in the upstairs master bedroom. Mac was dug in behind the king-size bed, while Mitch was holed up in the ensuite, in danger of running out of ammo. Eventually, Dudley Wagner, Mac, and I ganged up on Mitch Aitken and overwhelmed him in the living room, where he was cornered behind a couch, dodging a bombardment of projectiles. He was being pelted from different directions and putting up a brave resistance when the front door suddenly opened. Uh-oh! In walked Mrs. Steinberg with Siegfried trailing behind her. We instinctively hid our weapons, sat down in the living room, and assumed guilty facial expressions. It didn't take long for Mrs. Steinberg to start yelling, "Look at this mess! Siegfried, look at this mess!" We heard Mac's parents roaming through the house in shock and anger. We knew we were in big trouble. Soon, Siegfried came storming into the living room and asked Mac, "Who made this mess?" Mac replied, "Mitch had an accident." Siegfried paused momentarily, his temper building, then asked incredulously, "Do you mean to tell me that Mitch made an accident all over the house?" Mac had no time to reply as Siegfried's right hand darted out and struck him across the face. "Hit him again, Siegfried. Hit him again," Mrs. Steinberg yelled from the kitchen. Soon, the belt was whipping through the air, and Mac was under a table, shielding himself.

Mrs. Steinberg stormed out into the living room and declared, "You boys go home now." She didn't have to say it twice. We were gone in a flash while Mac was getting beaten. That was our pea-shooter adventure.

Another memorable beating took place when Mac found a few 8mm reels of adult films that Siegfried had stashed in a closet at their house. Mac invited a bunch of us grade five kids over to his house, one day after school, to view the films. It was a film festival occasion with us lads huddled into the basement of the Steinberg house. Initial delays were setting up the roll-down silver screen, on a flimsy aluminum tripod stand, and getting the projector gears fed with film. Some of the boys grew impatient until the lights went out and the first movie began to roll with the scratchy title of "Lusciously Beautiful." A blurry woman appeared in black & white while Mac figured out how to get the picture into focus. Soon we were all gazing at a slow-moving, seductive woman, who appeared old enough to be any one of our mothers. The room was silent except for the grinding sound of the gears in the projector. The film had no audible soundtrack, but it was a definite eye-opener for us boys from Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow Catholic school. Our undivided attention was consumed watching the woman on the screen disrobing to her undergarments and slowly swinging her bare breasts from side to side as she stared at us with a mischievous smile. The film came to an abrupt end, but it was a crowd pleaser. The room was silent. We were eager for more. It took a while, but Mac eventually got the second film rolling with the introduction title of "Sexy Sadie." It was similar to the first film, except this woman named Sadie had blonde hair and she aimed her rear end at us as she removed her clothing. She sat on a couch in her underwear, removed her bra, and slowly moved her breasts from side to side, smiling like she knew something we didn't. The film ended just as Siegfried burst into the room, switched on the lights and ordered us all to leave. We didn't see it, but we knew Mac got another beating. That was our stag film adventure.

Perhaps the reader should be reminded that back in the days of 1965, it was fairly common for parents to beat their kids. It was an accepted form of discipline. Of course, some parents went overboard. Even elementary schools in those days had a culturally approved appetite for beating misbehaved students.

It was common for teachers to cuff you on the back of the head for trivial misdeeds.

The nuns were especially mean.

Sister Stella was built like a bulldog, with wrists thicker than an average Grade 5 student's thigh.

We called her "The Swinging Nun."

We called Sister Mary Grace, "The Claw,"

due to the way she gripped whatever she was swinging at you.

They were big on discipline at school.

"The strap" was a regular form of punishment.

We called it "getting the slugs."

They often used yardsticks and long wooden pointers to administer punishment.

The strap was usually administered to your hands in the hallway, but on serious occasions,

the condemned student would be bent over a desk

at the front of the classroom and strapped on the buttocks mercilessly by the teacher.

Those were the good old school days we attended back then.

Sometimes, if you were on a bad streak of luck,

word about your beating at school got back to your parents, which would trigger another beating when you got home.

The circle of life!

Often when kids get into trouble, the source of the trouble could be directly attributed to the adults who raised them.

Even with good intentions at heart, parents can inadvertently lead their children on a downward path.

For my eleventh birthday, I was given a hobby chemistry set.

Although I didn't realize it at the time,

it was a gift my parents gave me to encourage scientific knowledge and possibly enhance my options for a career down the road.

I thanked them with sincere gratitude for the unconventional gift, as I marvelled at the handsome folding case

that contained shelves of dry chemicals sealed in vials,

along with a microscope, beakers and test tubes, several coils of wire, safety goggles, and the all-important instruction manual.

I was thrilled!

For several nights, I stayed in my bedroom

absorbed with experiments involving chlorides, sulphates, acids, nitrates and other chemicals I knew absolutely nothing about.

I was intrigued by the splendid colours of the chemicals.

I felt like a mad scientist.

I eventually decided to take my chemistry set over to Mac Steinberg's house.

When I arrived, Mac summoned me into the basement

where I was surprised to see his own lavish chemistry set laid out on a tabletop, under a bright incandescent light.

There were multitudes of dry chemicals, with every colour of the rainbow, and enough beakers and test tubes to fill a laboratory

from an old classic horror movie set.
It put my chemistry set to shame.

"Where did you get all this stuff?" I inquired as I gazed in disbelief.
"From my father," Mac replied,
as though I should have known better than to ask.
"Being a chemist has a lot of benefits.
He had it shipped directly from Scotland through one of his associates."
Associates was a word that made me frown a bit.
It sounded sinister.
"Wow! You have way more chemicals than I do,
and your microscope is like the ones they have at school."
Mac stood proudly behind his chemistry set,
and with the divine enlightenment of a TV televangelist, he asked,
"Do you realize what we can do with this stuff?"
He grinned with dark eyes glowing like cinders.
He answered his own question with a devil-may-care tone.
"We can make gunpowder!"

Horns should have sprouted out of his forehead when he said that.

Mac awaited my response.
I paused, not quite sure what to say.
I knew instinctively that no good would come from his idea.
Common sense dictated that boys and gunpowder were not compatible.
"We can make firecrackers any size we want!" Mac boasted.
All we need is charcoal, sulphur and potassium nitrate."

I was intrigued, but with mixed feelings.
My gut felt troubled.
No matter how we approached making gunpowder,
it was not going to end well.
We already had the three main ingredients,
but Mac insisted we needed more.
It soon became my task to get more potassium nitrate and sulphur
from the local Rexall Drug Store,
where I was a familiar face from countless visits
buying soda pop, junk food snacks and comic books.
No questions were asked when I brought the containers
of chemicals up to the cash register,
although the cashier eyeballed me hard,
trying to figure out what I was up to.
It was easier for a kid like me
to buy the ingredients for making gunpowder
than it was to buy a package of cigarettes.
Go figure.

The next day, we got together after school in Mac's basement
to create our first so-called firecracker
out of the cardboard centre-tube from a roll of aluminum foil.
It was a messy procedure,
filling the tube with our home-made gunpowder,
plugging the ends, and melting candle wax for a seal.
A long piece of string was used as a wick.
We tested several wicks

after soaking them in a potassium nitrate solution
and drying them with an electric fan.
Mac went through a box of matches,
igniting wicks of different lengths, with mixed results.
Some failed to ignite, some fizzled out too soon,
and some burned with a steady white sparkle
running smoothly along the entire length.

We needed to test our firecracker as soon as possible.
Three out of four of us agreed to meet after supper,
in the schoolyard when the streetlights went out.
As expected, Mitch passed on joining our rendezvous.
The influence of his maternal family upbringing guided him wisely.

At twilight, Mac, Dudley & I met
in front of Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow Catholic church,
then wandered across the quiet residential street
into the east side of the schoolyard.
The school yard had the appearance of a prison yard,
bound on three sides with a high chain-link fence.
All the main floor windows of the school
were covered with protective steel mesh guards.
The old Gothic house on the east side of the schoolyard
was the nuns' convent, a scary, unwelcoming place
surrounded by sinister looking old hanging trees.
There was a farmer's field to the north, an old apple orchard,
that had been rezoned and sold for the development
of high-rise apartment buildings.
On the west side of the schoolyard
there were two dark green portable classrooms,
and beyond the west fence were the backyards of detached houses.
The north-east and north-west corners of the school yard
were used as baseball diamonds.

As the three of us came around the back corner of the school,
we saw the silhouettes of a familiar young couple, arm-in-arm,
making their way around the far corner of the school.
They were Grade 8 students named Jeff Pappin and Louise Hayden.
Jeff was a jock and a good fist fighter,
and Louise was a babe who caught the eye of all the boys in school.
They were a popular pair at school,
and the subject of some gossip.
"Let's see what they are up to," Mac whispered,
grinning like a Cheshire Cat.

We crept towards them along the back of the school
until we got to the north-west corner,
where we stopped and peered silently around the corner.
The two young lovers were huddled in the dark alcove
at the west school exit door.
They were sitting on the concrete,
embraced passionately, oblivious to the world around them.
Teenage love.

We huddled at the back of the school,

where we often played "conkers" with chestnuts.
Conkers was a popular schoolyard game.
You drilled a hole in the centre of a ripe brown chestnut,
then ran a strong shoestring through it,
tying a knot at one end for the chestnut to dangle on.
The object of the game was to destroy your opponent's chestnut.
You took turns whacking at each other's chestnuts
until one shattered.
For each victory, your chestnut got a year older.
The older your chestnut was, the more bragging rights you had.
Boys tried all kinds of tricks to make their chestnuts as hard as rock.
Chestnuts were heated, some were frozen, some were waxed,
some were shellacked, some were coated with nail polish,
and some were coated with Lepage cement glue.
The chestnut trees in the neighbourhood around our school
were stripped bare from the midsection down.
They looked like trees with no pants on.

Our plan was for Mac to place the firecracker on the ground
around the west corner of the school,
so it would scare the bejesus out of the young lovers.
Mac would light the wick from the north side, out of their view,
then join us between the portables to watch the action.

Dudley and I snuck into position, squatting low for a clear view.
It was a familiar location for me, due to a previous misfortune,
when I somehow managed to get my head stuck under the portable.
It was one of those strange misdeeds in life
that we all seem to go through.
There was no rational explanation I could give myself,
or anyone else, as to why I stuck my head under the portable
through an opening between the wooden panel siding
and the gravel ground.
I got on my stomach and thrust my head through the opening
only to be rewarded with total darkness.
Panic set in when I was unable to pull my head back out.
I felt like my head was in a guillotine.
I clawed at the dirt beneath my chin
until I eventually got my head free.
It was another of my self-inflicted embarrassments.
I tried to bullshit people for several days,
explaining what happened to my face,
until the scrapes on my cheeks and chin finally healed.
The reminder of that episode did not evade me,
as we spied on the young lovers
from the same spot that my head had once been trapped.

Mac lit the wick, then crept off towards us.
We watched a steady, bright white light moving along the wick,
while Jeff and Louise were embraced by the doorway.
Suddenly, the gunpowder ignited into a loud, prolonged hiss,
and the west side of the school lit up in a flare of light,
illuminating the whole side of the school.
The young lovers dashed away towards the front of the school,
without looking back,

as our homemade fireworks zig-zagged wildly
and somehow lodged under the school portable we were hiding behind.
We momentarily froze,
then we ran like hell out of the back of the schoolyard,
by the same route we had entered from.
We ran along the side of the church,
then streaked across Markham Road,
and hide in Meagan's forest.

As panic set in, a siren could be heard,
slowly growing louder until
a fire truck arrived at the schoolyard.
People crept out of their houses,
while the crowd of onlookers grew along the street in front of the school.
The dry wooden joists under the portable were ideal fuel for combustion.
From the forest, we could see the clouds of smoke
rising behind the school,
enhanced by the beacon lights of the fire truck.
The portable was engulfed in flames.
We stared through the bushes for a while in disbelief at our misfortune.
The odds of what happened must have been one in a million,
but our bad luck struck us like a curse.
We made a solemn pact not to admit anything to anyone,
as the three of us departed for our homes,
knowing we were in big trouble.

The next morning hit like a sledgehammer
with local news reports of a portable heavily damaged by fire
at Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow Catholic school,
and for anyone with information to come forward.
I was stunned when the police arrived at my house in the early afternoon,
inquiring why I had made a recent purchase
of sulphur and potassium nitrate at the Rexall Drug Store.
The cat was out of the bag,
like the Guy Faux Gunpowder Plot,
the dominoes began to fall.
Our names were kept out of the media,
but everyone knew we were the culprits.
We were ostracized and disciplined.
Mitch was free from the mayhem
by wisely heeding his instincts.
Our families punished us accordingly,
Dudley & I got grounded doing work chores,
while Mac endured a vicious beating by Siegfried.
We gave statements to the police and school authorities.
The front of the portable was charcoal black from the fire damage.
For the remainder of the school year,
the displaced grade 4 class was relocated to the gymnasium.
To our surprise, we did not get expelled from school.
The staff kept an eagle eye on us, especially the nuns,
while our fellow students gave us the cold shoulder.
Most of the kids considered us zeros,
while a few rebels considered us heroes.
It was ultimately a case of a prank that went wrong.

We got reprimanded, but there were no criminal charges laid.
School resumed as usual, and over the summer holidays,
a new portable replaced the old portable
that had become an eyesore.

Our homemade firecracker endeavours were over.
Weeks passed by as life gradually returned to normal.
The wrath of our families had run its course,
and before long, our shenanigans resumed.
That was when Mac introduced us to the wonders of model rocketeering.
Our excitement was rekindled.
Even reluctant Mitch showed enthusiasm.

Mac received a model rocket supply catalogue
in the mail from a company in Colorado.
We studied the descriptions and specifications
as we marvelled over photographs of model rockets with cool names like:
The Astron X-Ray, Arcas Sprite & The Gamma Streak,
with payload compartments and rear ejection parachutes.
Mitch thought it would be cool to somehow install a camera
in a model rocket and get some aerial photographs.
I wondered if we could put a mouse in a payload compartment.
Dudley was excited to find a hobby
that none of the other kids in school had.
Mac was interested in the maximum altitude a model rocket could reach.
As a group, we were filled with high hopes,
agreeing to pool our money together, fill out an order form,
and get a model rocket shipped our way as soon as possible.
Everything was fine until Mac muttered,
"Uh oh. We have a bit of a problem."
He held a paper towards us that stated,
"They don't ship the rocket engines into Canada.
They will ship all the rocket supplies except engines."
"How come?" we wondered out loud.
"It's got something to do with the model rocketry laws in Canada,"
Mac continued.
"Apparently, they can ship the engine
to an authorized Canadian distributor
in the west end of Toronto, but it would be a hassle for us."
"How come?" we repeated in unison.
"It's way out in the west end of Toronto,
and I doubt if they would sell model rocket engines to kids our age."
There was gloom in the room until Mac got another
"light-bulb-came-on" expression on his face.
"You know what we can do?
We can still send away for the model rocket,
and when it arrives, we can make our own rocket engines.
It will be the same as making gunpowder."
After the trouble we had recently endured, none of us liked that idea.
There was much discussion that followed.
Mac earnestly tried to convince us,
with his unconventional theories of physics,
that our gunpowder formula would work well
with the material and design of a model rocket.
We were skeptical and departed for the day

with no resolution to our dilemma.

Siegfried was an intriguing mystery to us,
a steady source of our perplexity,
consistently inconsistent with his ongoing projects
and meandering mood swings.
He was educated with a science background, majoring in chemistry,
and many of his recent ideas
came from the Popular Mechanics magazine.
One time, he got hold of a rare convertible amphibious car
and drove us to Bay Ridges in Pickering,
brought the roof down, drove out onto the beach,
and proceeded out into the water
where we drove in wide circles around the bay.
It was a car with Siegfried at the wheel,
and four kids as passengers,
doing boating maneuvers out on the water of Lake Ontario.
We must have been a strange sight that afternoon,
for the people out on their yachts,
and for the people along the shoreline.

Siegfried got wind of our model rocketry interest
when he discovered the catalogue on the desk in Mac's bedroom.
He encouraged us to carry on with our plans
and was willing to get us the proper rocket engine
for a successful launch.

On a bright sunny Saturday morning, with very little breeze,
we gathered in the field behind the Steinberg house for our first launch.
An Astron Streak was our single-stage rocket of choice,
with a parachute recovery feature.
We launched it off a metal plate
attached to an aluminum antenna guide rod.
A cement block was used as a weight
to prevent the plate from tipping over.
Siegfried ran a long length of extension cord along the ground
from the rocket base to a car battery.
The wires were attached to the rocket engine with small alligator clips.

We cleared the area and stood behind Siegfried in anticipation.
In a mere nanosecond
after Siegfried touched the wire leads to the battery terminals,
there was a "swishing" sound,
as the rocket darted off into the sky, several hundred feet above us.
We momentarily lost sight of it until the parachute activated,
gently descending back to earth in a north-eastly direction.
It was a very enlightening experience for us.

All would have been well
if we had let our Saturday rocketry adventure be,
however, Mac was determined to do our own launch,
free of adult supervision.
We pooled our resources and gathered long pieces of old lamp wires
that we spliced together with electrical tape.
Instead of a car battery, we planned to use a 12-volt dry cell battery.

Siegfried discarded the launch pad we had originally used,
so we built our own out of an old walkie-talkie antenna
and two cement blocks that would be used
to wedge the antenna in place.
We filled the old engine cartridge casing with our homemade gunpowder
and sealed the ends with candle wax,
leaving two small wire leads exposed for connection.
Then we waited patiently for a weekend
when Mac's parents would be away.

When the day finally came,
Mitch, Dudley and I arrived at Mac's house ready for adventure.
It was a dry breezy morning with steadily moving clouds.
I brought binoculars to track the rocket
in case the wind carried it away.
Our Astron Streak rested on the guide antenna
that was stuck in the ground between two cement blocks.
Dudley made the connections of the lamp wire to the rocket engine,
as I held the binoculars in anticipation,
and Mac squatted down by the battery, ready for ignition.
In all the excitement, no one realized the lamp wire
had become entangled around one of Dudley's shoes
as he hurried back towards us.
As Mac applied the leads to the battery,
Dudley kicked at his entangled shoe,
which tightened the lamp wire to the rocket
and caused the antenna to lean at a forty-five-degree angle.
Instead of a vertical launch,
the rocket hissed with a bright light
and shot horizontally across the field,
leaving a streak of flames along the grass in its wake.
Soon, a grass fire raged out of control.
Sirens started blaring,
and people came out on the balconies
of the distant apartment buildings
along the south perimeter of the field.

The fire department arrived with a crew
that dragged long hoses out into the field.
They sprayed water from two directions
and eventually doused the flames into wisps of smoke.

They scolded us and said we were lucky no one got hurt.
We went through another lengthy process of trouble afterwards,
especially after being the culprits responsible
for the recent fire that destroyed a portable
at the Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow Catholic School.
Life was not kind to us for a long time afterwards.
We were all grounded with work chores
and threatened with boarding school for delinquent boys.
We were forbidden from seeing each other.

Our parents were contacted to retrieve us.
It was a solemn gathering,

and as we slowly departed the Steinberg property,
we didn't see it,
but we knew Mac got another beating.
That was our last model rocketeering adventure,
and the last time we hung out together for a long time.